

CHARACTERISTICS OF CHOICE PROGRAMS THAT WORK --- AND DON'T

There is now considerable evidence as to features marking successful choice programs -- and at least by inference, the traits associated with unsuccessful programs are becoming clearer. Compiling the evidence from an array of research types and sources, the lists which follow enjoy substantial empirical support.

Characteristics of Successful Choice Systems

1. The design of most or all programs to accommodate the range of students generally representative of the district -- avoiding the identification of target populations in terms of ability levels, such as "Gifted and Talented" or "Low Achievers."
2. Sufficient freedom from 'standard' requirements and procedures to permit the design and operation of genuinely diverse educational programs differing as to goals, curriculum, instructional treatments and environment, and/or evaluation strategies.
3. Sufficient diffusion of authority to permit the staff in each program the opportunity to design and implement their own vision of schooling.
4. Genuine positive appeal of each program to a group of students within the district.
5. A blending of majoritarian and minority concerns -- so that the school board is satisfied that each program falls within the parameters of majority or collective interests, and the minority represented in each program can find the program responsive to its particular concerns.
6. Both students and staff become affiliated with particular programs as a matter of uncoerced choice -- no assignments, 'or else,' or 'last chance' placements for either group.
7. Genuine support and backing for the choice arrangement from central district officials.
8. Encouragement to each program to maintain its own uniqueness and distinctiveness.
9. Periodic evaluations of each program in its own terms as well as on the basis of criteria specified by the district.
10. The locating of each program so as to make it accessible to all who might be interested.
11. Provision of good transportation services.

12. Continuous watchfulness to prevent such inequitable choice outcomes as segregation by race, class, or ability -- and willingness to deal with such problems with due regard both for equity and for individual educational choice.
13. Willingness to provide start-up funding to enable new programs to be designed, equipped, and launched.

Characteristics of Successful Individual Schools of Choice

Successful schools of choice identify choice "programs" as distinct administrative units with their own personnel (students and staff), spending most or all of the school day together. This kind of definition is important to distinguishing schools, or schools-within-schools, of choice from the less attractive and less successful opportunity to choose curricular electives.

1. Educational goals representing a broader concern with student accomplishment than content and skill mastery. A sustained interest in student cognitive, personal, and social development is typical -- character as well as intellectual development.
2. Each is small enough to permit the personalizing of education -- and organized so as to realize this purpose.
3. Avoidance of the usual power structure of schools, with authority concentrated in the principal's office. Education-related decisions are made by individual teachers and groups of teachers.
4. School organization is sufficiently non-formalized in official policies and regulations and non-bureaucratized to permit organizational flexibility and thus responsiveness to individual cases.
5. Structure, scheduling, and general expectations within the school all conduce to professional interaction and collaboration among teachers.
6. Extended roles and responsibilities for both staff and students. Teachers are more broadly responsible for student growth and accomplishment, and for total school effectiveness, than elsewhere; and students feel more responsibility for the school, as well as for their own progress.
7. Each school has a clear set of goals -- specifying a mission that is embraced by all staff members.
8. There is considerable self-consciousness within the school about the type of place it is and wants to be -- a preoccupation with school climate, ethos, or moral order.
9. Instructional approaches enriched by the inclusion of experiential learning strategies, and by independent study possibilities.

10. Opportunities for collaborative and cooperative learning, not solely for individual and/or large group classroom experience.

Characteristics of Choice Programs, Schools, and Systems That Don't Work

The denial or absence of any of the foregoing represent conditions or traits associated with choice programs and systems that don't work. For emphasis, the following counter-indicators of success can be repeated:

1. There is no choice for families (among viable options or meaningfully differentiated alternatives) ... or there is no genuine choice (by virtue of pressures on the choosers).
2. For staff, there is no choice.
3. The program is imported intact from elsewhere -- or designed by district administrators -- or otherwise generated in a manner that imposes it on those expected to operate it.
4. There is little or no lead time for staff to design the program -- and/or there is little or no time for staff to meet and collaborate in sustaining it.
5. Programs of choice are designed as 'least departure' programs, representing and permitting absolutely minimal departures from other local programs.
6. Schools are forced to become schools of choice -- and the distinctiveness and coherence cannot develop.
7. Parents receive little information about available choices and the public in general hears little about the choice arrangement.